

Remarks at a Greek Independence Day Reception

March 29, 2023

The President. Archbishop, thank you very much for those kind words. And I should begin by explaining why this may be the first Greek American event that my wife Jill has not been with me. But she is down in Tennessee with the families of those who were killed in that God-awful attack. And she apologized for not being able to be with you.

But let me just say that my sister Val is visiting with me, so I have the better part of the family. I used to be 3 years older than Val, and now I'm 20 years older than Val. *[Laughter]* We went to the same university together. I graduated; she graduated with honors. That's not a joke. *[Laughter]* She managed every one of my campaigns since I was in high school and—but—so, anyway, I want to acknowledge my sister, who is the best part of the family.

And I want to—*[applause]*. And, Archbishop, I want to say that I've—I found that the two most Christ-like figures I've ever met were His All Holiness and the Pope, and they're friends. And they've talked to—he's—the Pope has talked to me about the friendship. And the Pope is ill now, so say an extra prayer for him. But he still wonders why, as a Roman Catholic, I bless myself this way.

[At this point, the President began to make the sign of the cross, touching his right shoulder before his left.]

[Laughter] You know, I've been—I've been hanging around—and it's all your fault. *[Laughter]* I—*[laughter]*—you all think I'm kidding. I'm not. Not really. It was a—where's John Sarbanes? Is he here?

Audience member. He went to vote.

The President. Oh, he went to vote? Well, John Sarbanes's dad, Paul, was—hard to believe, but junior to me in seniority, but my educator. Paul was a brilliant guy, and I owe Paul all that I know about Greece and the involvement for—deep involvement for so many years. And—but I wanted to say hello to John.

Look, it's wonderful to welcome all of you to the White House to celebrate 202 years of Greek independence and all the great contributions Greek and Greek Americans have made to our country. The world owes a great deal of debt to Greece, including the revolutionary idea of democracy—and it was revolutionary at the time—which continues to deliver for the people to this day.

In fact, earlier today I was cohosting the second international Summit of—for Democracy. And democracies and nations around the world came together to commit ourselves to defending democracy. And that was done earlier today. So it's great to have all of you here on this special day.

Your Eminence, it's an honor to see you and so many representatives of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America again.

I also want to welcome the Ambassador of Greece and Cyprus, and our own Ambassador to Greece, George Tsunis. George, where are you? There he is.

And by the way, there's a very important Republican in former administrations, in the days when we used to really like each other. *[Laughter]* I still do. How you doing, buddy? Good to see

you, Tom. Tom Korologos. Tom and I spent a whole heck of a lot of hours arguing and then shaking hands. Right, Tom? I—good to see you, pal. It's great to see you.

And if you'll excuse the point of personal privilege, as we used to say in Senate, it's great to be here with friends like Father Alex. Father, I'm going to ruin your reputation by talking. And the only reason I ran for President and got elected was so I could award him the Presidential Medal of Freedom last year. *[Laughter]* Thank you, Father.

As a matter of fact, Father, I still haven't figured out—are you the reason I've been made an archon? Is that what happened? *[Laughter]* I don't—I don't know. But you've been a great friend for a long time, and your family as well have been great friends of ours.

And I'm here with my president, of the Biden Institute, a guy named Dennis Assanis, who is the president of the University of Delaware. But the real power is his wife. And both of you stand up. I want everybody to see you guys. These are from Delaware.

And great friends like Andy and Mike Manatos. They're a big part of the reason my Greek American constituents in Delaware sometimes refer to me as—the man sitting behind you, Father, who helped me my very first campaign—directly behind you—was—the nickname I got early on when I won by 3,200 votes in—for the Senate seat when I was 29 years old is because—started calling me "Joe Bidenopoulos" because—*[laughter]*—oh, you think I'm kidding. I'm not—I'm not joking. Am I? I'm not joking. Because of the overwhelming support from the Greek American community.

And—I'm a little worried. My sister is sitting next to Tom Hanks. *[Laughter]* But, Tom—welcome, pal. Welcome.

I want to begin today by acknowledging all the families across Greek—Greece who are grieving loved ones lost during the train accident in Tempí. It was a tragic, tragic accident, and they're in our prayers. And Jill and I and the American people were deeply saddened by this tragedy. And our prayers continue to be with the Greek people, including all those who lost loved ones and those who are recovering from those injuries.

And this afternoon, we honor the deep history of the united—our nations, we're—and honor the lives that were cut short last month as well.

Thousands of years ago, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates said—and he is said to have discussed the simple yet profound wisdom. He said, "Know thyself." Know thyself. Well, to truly know America, we have to know the history and our hopes—you have to know a little about Greece to really understand it.

Greece is woven into the very foundations of our democracy and of our Nation. We see it across this city, from the columns of the Capitol to the—figures that flank the Supreme Court, inspired by Themis, and—the Greek goddess of law of justice—of law and justice. And more than that, we feel it in our Nation's soul, because we are governed as "We the People."

The United States is the only Nation in the world built on an idea. An idea. Every other nation in the world is based on geography, ethnicity, or religion. But we're based on an idea—and it's not hyperbole to suggest that—the idea that we're all created equal. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [and women] are created equal, endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable rights . . . life, liberty"—no other nation is based on an idea.

And it was essentially a Greek idea early on. I really mean it. It was Greek in all those years ago that inspired the Framers to believe in this radical idea and to build a nation around it.

Years after American independence, this is the same idea that brave Greek patriots—to fight their own freedom—for their own freedom as well, laying the groundwork for a future that would make both our nations proud.

So today and every day, Greek independence is a celebration for Americans and Greeks alike. It gives us the chance to honor this history that binds us to the values that unite us: liberty, equality, dignity, and democracy. And democracy. Throughout our shared history, every generation has to step up and protect those values against democracy's moral—mortal foes.

You know, I learned in graduate school and undergraduate school about—when I was a political science and history major—that democracy had to be protected by every generation. And I used to think it was more hyperbole than anything else. But it need be every generation. There's nothing automatic about democracy. Nothing automatic about it.

And we saw this during World War II when Greece and the United—Greek and the United States both fought the forces of fascism. We saw it in the cold war when our people stood as one to prevail against communism.

And we see it today as our nations stand together to support the brave people of Ukraine as they fight for the same values Greeks and American patriots did all those years ago: liberty, dignity—dignity—dignity. Not just liberty—dignity and democracy.

Simply put, as allies and partners and friends, we've proven time again that we aren't just inheritors of democracy, we're its champions. We're its champions. And that's thanks in large part to the courage and character of the Greek American community.

You know, throughout my career, I've been lucky to see this courage and character up close.

I see it in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, which has always stood up for social justice and civil rights. I've seen it in the leaders across the Greek American community, who have always led with heart and with hope. None more consequential, in my view—none more consequential—than Paul Sarbanes, as I said earlier. He was a guy who educated me.

And most of all, I've seen it in the character and courage of millions of Greek immigrants who've always enriched what it means to be American.

As I said earlier, our country owes a debt of—to the founders of the Greek democracy and the first who taught us, "We the People," to hold power, to shape our destiny.

But you know, we all owe a great deal to Greek families like so many of yours, who left everything behind to push that destiny ever forward, who generation after generation have strived to make our Nation more free and more fair, and who across our country have framed the flame of liberty and fanned it. And it started to flicker in Athens a thousand years ago, and now it burns brightly here.

Today, let's recommit to our work.

And by the way, we have the head of the—a committee I once chaired, the Foreign Relations Committee. We've got a guy sitting over there, who I think is Greek—[laughter]—who is a—who is mildly—[applause]—stand up. And there's two things you've got to know about him. One, he's smarter than you. And, two, he's tough. [Laughter] Good to see you, man. Thanks for being here.

And, folks, look, at this moment where our world is at an—and many of you have heard me say this before, Madam Ambassador—but we're—the world is at an inflection point. You're going to see things that are going to—the next 3 to 5 years, and the last 3 or 4 or 5 years, is going to determine what the next four or five decades are going to look like.

We go through this period every five or six generations, and we're at that point now. The world is changing. It's changing significantly. We have an opportunity. We have an opportunity to continue to be the keepers of the flame if we do it well.

So let's work together to show that knowing America—knowing ourselves means working for the future for great—with greater hope, equality, and a possibility for people around the world. I absolutely know we can do it.

And the chairman has heard me say this many times: I've never been more optimistic about our future than I am today. I really mean it. We have such an enormous opportunity not just for the United States, but to change the nature of how we deal in this hemisphere and around the world, because we're the United States of America. We've got to remember that. We're the United States of America. There is nothing, nothing beyond our capacity—nothing—if we set our mind to it. I really mean it. Not a single thing as long as we do it together.

And I can think of no greater group of people to do it with than the Greek American community. So happy Independence Day to you and your friends. God bless you all.

And before the reception begins, we have a performance for you. And I'm not even going to tell you who it is. I'm going to say—[*laughter*]*—but thank you, thank you, thank you all.*

Let's bring out somebody who Tom knows well. Thank you.

[Musician and actor Rita Wilson sang several songs. Following the performance, the President returned to the stage and spoke as follows.]

The President. Whoa! Holy mackerel. [*Laughter*] I think that is the first time in the White House. And by the——

Ms. Wilson. I hope so, if it's not the last.

The President. By the way, I tell you one other—is a first thing. I've never seen any guy play with both hands and both feet at the same—[*laughter*]*—you see this guy?*

Ms. Wilson. Rich Mercurio.

The President. Talk about coordination. I mean, I think it's—it's an athletic feat. [*Laughter*] God love you. That's incredible.

Musician Rich Mercurio. Thank you. I——

The President. I tell you what, man.

Now, I just want to say thank you, thank you, thank you. You're beautiful. Your voice is beautiful. Your talent is incredible.

Ms. Wilson. Thank you.

The President. And the only thing I worry about is your taste in men. [*Laughter*] Tom, come up here. Come here. Come here.

I'm not used to hanging around with Academy Award winners, but we got one here, so I want to thank you both very, very much. I really mean it. Thank you for being here.

I'm sure everyone enjoyed it. And I'm sure they don't want you to stop. And—but you can either stay here and try to coax her, or go down the other end and get something to eat.

But—[*laughter*]*—but all kidding aside, thank you, thank you, thank you very much.*

Ms. Wilson. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. I want to thank the whole community. I really mean it. You're—the one thing about the Greek community I've learned over these years—and it's been 50 years; I hate to admit it's that long—but is loyalty, loyalty, loyalty. And I tell you, I think my sister and I, and my family and I, have returned it, but you've been incredibly, incredibly loyal. Thank you so much for everything.

Ms. Wilson. Thank you.

The President. I really mean it.

And one more thing: The community—and they know it, the people who have been deeply involved—have been with me in good times and very bad times. In terms of personal loss, in terms of political loss, you've always stuck up for me. You've always been there for me. And I just want to thank you personally for that, and I really mean it. It means a great deal.

And you know, Father, I'm not joking about my affection for the church and how close it is. So thank you, thank you very much.

So, everybody, you want to have something to eat or something to do or something to drink—down the other end. Thank you.

Tom, you want to say anything?

Actor Tom Hanks. I——

The President. I know you're not used to a mike.

Mr. Hanks. I—no, I am not Greek. [Laughter] But I had the good sense to marry one.

The President. That's it. Well, thank you all so very much. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:30 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Archbishop Elpidophoros, Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church of America; Evelyn Dieckhaus, Hallie Scruggs, William Kinney, Cynthia Peak, Mike Hill, and Katherine Koonce, who were killed in the shooting at the Covenant School in Nashville, TN, on March 27; Ecumenical Patriarch and Archbishop of Constantinople Bartholomew; Pope Francis; Rep. John P. Sarbanes; Greece's Ambassador to the U.S. Alexandra Papadopoulou; Cyprus's Ambassador to the U.S. Marios Lysiotis; Father Alexander Karloutsos, former vicar general, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America; Dennis N. Assanis, president, University of Delaware, and his wife Eleni; former Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Legislation Andrew E. Manatos and his son Mike; and Sen. Robert Menendez, in his capacity as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Greek Independence Day reception.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Assanis, Dennis N.; Assanis, Eleni; Bartholomew, Archbishop; Biden, Jill T.; Dieckhaus, Evelyn; Elpidophoros, Archbishop; Francis, Pope; Hanks, Thomas J.; Hill, Mike; Karloutsos, Alexander; Kinney, William; Koonce, Katherine; Korologos, Tom C.; Lysiotis, Marios; Manatos, Andrew E.; Manatos, Mike; Menendez, Robert; Mercurio, Rich; Owens, Valerie Biden; Papadopoulou, Alexandra; Peak, Cynthia; Sarbanes, John P.; Scruggs, Hallie; Tsunis, George J.; Wilson, Rita.

Subjects: Cyprus, Ambassador to the U.S.; Greece, Ambassador to the U.S.; Greece, relations with U.S.; Greece, train derailment in Tempi; Greece, U.S. Ambassador; Greek Independence Day; Holy See (Vatican City), Pope; Russia, conflict in Ukraine; Summit for Democracy; Tennessee, shooting in Nashville; Ukraine, Russian invasion and airstrikes.

DCPD Number: DCPD202300244.